

News

HUNDREDS MARCH AGAINST EDUCATION CUTS

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Cecilia Mendez holds up a sign during a budget protest Thursday in front of the Stockton School for Adults on Pacific Avenue and Harding Way in Stockton. Below, Lincoln High student David Jara, 17, places a bagful of books into a coffin to represent cuts to education during Thursday's protest. CLIFFORD OTO/The Record

By **Roger Phillips**

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STOCKTON - The imagery and clothing were dark.

A coffin was wheeled up Pacific Avenue. Students wore ghoulish face paint. Tombstones lined up in front of Delta said "R.I.P Students," "R.I.P. Arts & Music" and "R.I.P. Teachers."

A skeleton on a pole, garbed in a red cap and gown, bore a gloomy sign of the times: "Late Great California Educational System."

Perhaps 500 people from around San Joaquin County - students, teachers, parents, administrators - marched more than two miles Thursday afternoon from the Stockton School for Adults north on Pacific Avenue to Delta, chanting and urging passing motorists to honk. There were honks aplenty.

As was the case in rallies and marches around the state and the country, they were protesting severe budget cuts.

"I hope they're listening," said Live Oak Elementary fourth-grade teacher Sonja Renhult, referring to politicians in Sacramento. "What we really want to have happen is for parents to realize what's going on. We're scrambling for pieces of paper in our classrooms. It's just not OK."

Franklin High senior Elizabeth Torres said, "I want to save my school, to get more opportunities for Latinos and other students. I want to go to college. If we don't have schools, we won't go to college."

Nearly 26,000 teachers and other school officials in California received pink slips one year ago. Thousands more will get pink slips this year by the state deadline 10 days from now. According to Education Week magazine, California is ranked 47th in the United States in per-pupil spending. It could drop into last place in 2010-11.

School boards around San Joaquin County have voted in recent weeks to send layoff notices to hundreds of teachers. Earlier this week, Stockton Unified's board approved the elimination of 230 full-time positions.

"At what point does there have to be a recognition that it takes resources to bring about student achievement?" asked Jim Thomas, deputy superintendent for business services at the San Joaquin County Office of Education, who took part in the march. "The resources have been eroded away, and the last couple of years they've been stripped away."

As darkness settled in at Delta, marchers lit candles and gathered to listen to speeches from educators, union leaders and students.

Josette Munoz, an 18-year-old freshman at Delta and a Stagg High graduate, summed up the mood of many:

"It's sad," she said, "that you have to fight to get an education."

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